



## Dentures, Corpses, and Privies: Paul Revere's Medical Careers

BY NINA RODWIN

Though Paul Revere is known for having engaged in many trades and business ventures, his role in the Midnight Ride has overshadowed his involvement in many of them, perhaps most especially his work in the medical field. Specifically, Paul Revere established a dental practice, conducted inquiries as the Suffolk County Coroner, and enforced rules and regulations as the first President of Boston's Board of Health. Exploring these aspects of Revere's life helps advance our understanding of 18th-century medicine and illuminates health crises endured by Revere's family.

Although it is unknown why Revere chose to practice dentistry part-time, he certainly always searched for additional revenue streams. His skills as a silversmith would have allowed him to create thin wires to fasten in his patients' false teeth. Revere learned his rudimentary skills from Dr. John Baker, one of the first trained dentists to arrive in America from England, long before the first American dental school was established in 1840.

Most of our information on Revere's dentistry practice comes from two advertisements he posted in the *Boston Gazette*. At the start of his practice in 1768, Revere announced that he could replace customers' "Fore-Teeth" with "artificial Ones," that appeared "as well as the Natural" at his silversmith shop. Within two years, Revere claimed he had "fixt [*sic*] some Hundreds of Teeth," and was confident he could "fix them as well as any Surgeon-Dentist who ever came from London." Never one to shy away from promoting his credentials, Revere added that his dentures were of "real Use in Speaking and Eating," suggesting his competitors' products were ineffectual. From these advertisements and limited records, Revere seems to have mostly wired in false teeth and cleaned patients' teeth.

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Although he did not offer to pull teeth for his customers, according to his account books, he performed this painful procedure at least once, on his friend Dr. Joseph Warren.

The Paul Revere House Memorial Association has recently acquired a partial denture from our late donor, Dr. Martin Deranian, a dentist and collector. While it cannot be conclusively proven that Revere made this denture, an included card states that the artifact is "attributed to Paul Revere," but provides no additional evidence. According to Dr. Deranian, the construction of the denture matches the techniques used during the era. The denture is made of ivory and has wooden pegs attached at the side. These pegs would be fitted into a patient's tooth socket. Their saliva would cause the wood to expand, helping the denture stay in place.

Revere's dental practice appears to have been short lived, as he devoted the majority of his time to other business ventures following the Revolution. However, Revere distinguished himself by being one of the first Americans to use dental records



*You can see this partial denture on display in our visitor center!  
Property of the Paul Revere Memorial Association.*

## From the Executive Director...

I am sure it comes as no surprise that I am an unapologetic fan of history. I was the nerdy kid who thought history was interesting and I majored in history in college without any real sense of how I might make a career of my interest. Since I have, for almost 40 years now, been paid to think about history and its value, it seems the job part worked out pretty well. Yet, in spite of all my work and that of thousands of my history and museum colleagues, there are still too many people who don't like or understand the significance and utility of history.

This is a bit confounding because history is such a great tool. It comes wrapped in compelling stories, offers perspective against which to measure cause and effect, and helps us define who we are and how we want to be remembered. Also, at some point, perhaps while making the argument for why schools should devote more time to social studies, many of us realized that you can teach almost any discipline through the lens of history and make it richer.

Still, the wonder of history, the power of unlocking

fascinating stories about the past, is also its greatest frustration. So often the thread we seek is beyond our grasp. As practitioners in the field of history, who amongst us wouldn't love to actually be able to visit the past as an observer. No matter how much evidence we uncover there are the inevitable gaps that require some level of thoughtful speculation. For Paul Revere, the lack of a diary or copious surviving personal letters often leaves us wondering "What was he thinking?" Did he like living in the home at North Square? Was he proud of what he accomplished?

It is perhaps this uncertainty, this requirement that you use your imagination, that makes history unappealing for some. Boy, how sad is that! More likely though it is that history was never presented to them in a manner that was engaging. So as purveyors of history we have our work cut out for us. However, if you love history, it's really a great challenge to have.



Nina Zannieri

as forensic evidence to identify a corpse. This event was likely an emotional moment for Revere, since the body he identified was that of his close friend, Dr. Joseph Warren. In addition to the aforementioned extraction, Revere had wired an artificial tooth in Warren's mouth years before the doctor was killed during the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775. British forces had desecrated and haphazardly buried Warren's body as they exited the battlefield. Paul Revere and two of Warren's brothers identified the doctor's decomposing body ten months later. According to tradition, when Revere saw the artificial tooth, he "recalled the wire he used in fastening it in." Interestingly, this event only marked Revere's first foray into posthumous examinations, as he would return to such work after the Revolution.

Nearly two decades after identifying Warren's body, Revere was appointed as the Suffolk County Coroner in 1795. During this era, coroners used few forensic methods to investigate their cases. The process would begin by Revere issuing a warrant to the town sheriff who would then summon a jury to discuss the available evidence. Then Revere would write a coroner's report, summarizing the case along with the jury's verdict. Over six years, Revere conducted 47 investigations. These cases not only illustrate the fragility of life during the early republic, they also provide a fascinating glimpse into cases of mental illness and addiction.

Out of the 47 deaths Revere investigated, 20 cases were attributed to accidental drowning. Many of the incidents involved people falling off the nearby wharves. For example, Revere recorded one case where a man "struck his head against the ship & fell into the water...at the end of Long

Wharf." As he noted for the majority of his cases, Revere simply stated "Verdict misfortune."

As a coroner, Revere also investigated at least four cases of opiate overdoses. Instead of currently-used opiates like heroin or fentanyl, most of these victims died from overdoses of laudanum, an opiate-based drink which was often mixed with alcohol and sometimes chloroform. By the mid-1800s, laudanum was extremely popular for treating a variety of symptoms. In fact, Revere's first investigation was on Daniel Keller, "who poisoned himself by taking a large dose of Ladunum [*sic*]." Interestingly, Revere notes that Keller was "born of reputable parents," hinting at the long-assumed, but scientifically disproven, theory that addiction only occurred in people of a certain class or race.

Besides laudanum, it seems that pure opium was available in some areas. Revere recorded that Samuel Wolf died at a boarding house after he "cut some Opium in small pieces" and placed them into a "tumbler of water." Wolf "swallowed most of it" and "came to his death by a fit of Insanity." Revere often included observations on a person's state of mind at the time of their death, especially when narcotics were involved. For example, when "Cornelius Smith...destroyed himself by taking Ladiunum [*sic*]" Revere mentions the jury thought Smith "was not in his right mind."

In addition to opiates, heavy alcohol use was prevalent in colonial America. By the late 18th-century, the average person drank around "34 gallons of beer...five gallons of distilled spirits and one gallon of wine" per year. As such, alcohol-related fatalities were almost inevitable. In one detailed account, Revere notes that Capt. Barnabas Young was a "drunken man" in a

“great deal of Trouble” because he could not “give his Owner a proper account of his Voiage [sic].” “In a fit of insanity,” Capt. Young “shot himself & fell into the water.” The jury observed “a wound in his breast which appeared to be from a pistol ball,” and declared a verdict of “misfortune.”

Revere’s work as a coroner also opened further avenues for additional work. He was nominated to Boston’s newly formed Board of Health in 1799. Ironically, members of the Board did not need any medical background, but were rather selected by each County based on their “standing as citizens.” Members were expected to “command the advice and assistance of physicians” as needed. Revere was soon appointed as the President of the Board, and became responsible for preventing the spread of disease in Boston.

Revere’s main task was to prevent another outbreak of yellow fever. Earlier epidemics struck Boston in 1797 and 1798. The General Court of Massachusetts feared that a stronger epidemic could hit the city, similar to what Philadelphia experienced in 1793. One of the Board’s earlier and most effective measures was their decision to inspect ships coming from “any part of the west-Indies.” Ships were forbidden to “pass the castle until examined by the visiting Physician of the board.” If “judged necessary,” the physician could send the ship’s “Master, crew and passengers” to Rainsford Island, where they would be quarantined.

While some practices from the period seem antiquated to us, other methods worked and seem sensible even today. For example, the Board likely made the right decision when they cleaned out “13 ponds and cellars of stagnant water,” although at the time they did not understand why. Revere and his contemporaries had unknowingly identified one of the sources of yellow fever but they did not understand how the “stagnant water” and “putrid puddles” were connected to the life cycle of mosquitoes that transmitted the disease. Revere’s request that Boston inhabitants “empty all Privies whose contents are within 18 inches of the surface” likely aided the situation as well.

Revere continued as the President of the Board until 1801. Although we do not know why Revere chose to quit, this is around the time that he began to focus his efforts on his copper rolling mill. Ironically, in 1808, Revere was fined by the Board of Health for improperly disposing of waste water at his Canton property.

Throughout his time in the medical field, Revere also dealt personally with difficult health issues in his family, including one involving his son-in-law, Thomas Eayres. Revere’s daughter Frances had married Eayres and moved to Worcester in 1791 so that Eayres could continue his trade. Revere wrote a letter in his favor, describing Eayres as an “Industrious and Ingenious Tradesman” with “good morals.” However, Eayres’s state of mind soon began to deteriorate. By the end of the 1790s, the situation was so dire that Revere felt he needed to consult a physician for advice.

Revere contacted Dr. Samuel Willard in the summer of 1798,



*Rainsford Island today. While it is no longer used as a quarantine site, the island is part of Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area. Image accessed on Wikipedia Commons via Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic License.*

confessing that his son-in-law, “a very promising young man,” was now “deprived of his reason.” Revere was frustratingly vague about Eayres’s condition. When Revere wrote to Willard, he stated that Eayres had suffered “for several years,” and was now “so bad” that Revere had no choice but to place him “in the Country” under Willard’s care. Revere added that Eayres very presence at home “distresse[d] [Frances] much.” A year later, Revere informed Eayres’s brother-in-law, Matthew Davis, that Eayres was “quite distracted.” By 1802, Revere updated Davis, noting that Eayres’s “fits of Insanity [were] more frequent.”

Dr. Willard attempted to heal Eayres from his farm in the country and, for a while, he believed that Eayres’s “health was secured.” However, these improvements seem to have been temporary. Overall, Dr. Willard does not provide much information about his treatment methods. Only one letter from Revere gives a hint about Eayres’s treatment. “I highly approve of your putting him to work,” Revere wrote to Willard in November 1801. Years earlier, Revere had consulted his own physician, Dr. Danforth, who also agreed “that nothing but hard Labor & Coarse living could help [Eayres.]” Thankfully, Revere was confident that Willard’s “humanity” would ensure that Eayres was not “pushed farther than He is able to bear.”

Although Revere approved of Willard’s methods, he often disputed the costs of Eayres’s medical care. On one occasion, Revere confessed that he “thought fifty dollars was high for medicine,” but he ultimately relented, agreeing that Dr. Willard was “the best Judge.” Revere made numerous attempts to reach out to Eayres’s extended family members to get further financial assistance, but was never successful. By October 1802, the situation was untenable - Revere went to the County Court to declare Thomas Eayres “*non compos mentis*.” This legal term officially declared that Eayres was incapable of taking care of himself. The court appointed Revere’s son-in-law Jedidiah Lincoln as Eayres’s legal guardian. Jedidiah and his wife Mary took care of the medical costs until Eayres’s son came of age. Although it is unclear when Thomas Eayres died, it seems that he spent the rest of his life living with Dr. Willard. According to Revere’s last letter to Davis, Eayres was allowed to “eat with the Docter [sic] & family, and visit the Neighbors.”

Boston, May 2, 1812

Received of My Son Doct<sup>r</sup> John Revere fifty dollars for all the expenses of his Education, and in full of all demands to this day.

Paul Revere

We know Paul covered the bill for John's medical expenses- but the "student loans" of fifty dollars were paid back by 1812, as seen in this letter. Property of the Paul Revere Memorial Association.

Revere's medical affiliations may have inspired his descendants, as several pursued careers in medicine. John Revere, Paul and Rachel's last child, graduated from Harvard in 1807 and received his medical degree at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland by 1811. John Revere wrote his thesis on mental illness, perhaps inspired by his family's history with Thomas Eayres. John Revere eventually taught at the University of the City of New York's medical school (later known as NYU) but unfortunately caught typhus from a patient and died in 1847.

While today's advances in medicine might have shocked Paul Revere, he also likely would have been intrigued by them. Many of our visitors are surprised to learn that Revere had any involvement in medicine. Though he lacked a college degree, his accomplishments and community service reveal his inquisitive nature. These lesser-known activities may explain why Revere's obituary does not mention his famous ride, but rather recognized his loss to the overall community: "Seldom has the tomb closed upon a life so honorable and useful." ❖

**Sources consulted:**

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- Columbia Sentinel*
- Boston Gazette*
- J.L. Bell, Boston1775.com
- Ester Forbes, *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In*
- Paul Revere Coroner Inquests and Notes, 1796-99, Massachusetts Historical Society
- Paul Revere Family Papers, MHS
- Donald M. Nielsen, *The Revere Family*, New England Historical and Genealogical Register

## New Acquisition! A Revere Family Bible

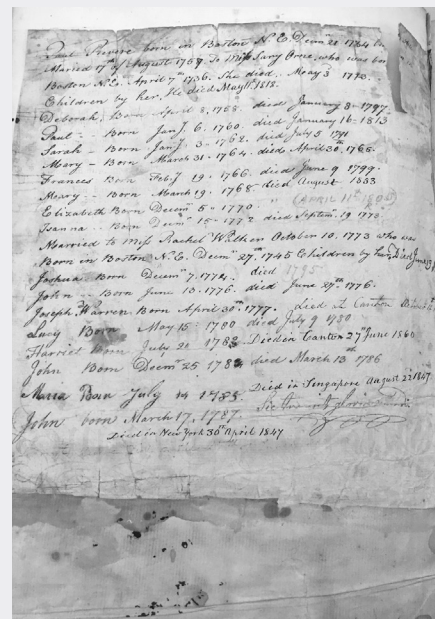
We are excited to share this image from our most recent acquisition, a Baskerville Bible printed in Birmingham, England between 1769–72 that has been handed down through the Revere family, initially given by Paul Revere to his daughter, Harriet.

While the Bible itself would be an interesting acquisition, this page makes it a truly invaluable resource for us. The majority of the text is in Paul Revere's hand, and he even lists his birthdate as December 21, 1734. While this may seem like a small matter,

it is actually groundbreaking for us as a conclusive date for his birth has proven elusive over the years due to calendar changes and there being only an official record of his baptism.

We have only put forth a range of dates around his baptism previously, but at least in Paul's mind, December 21 is the real date. If Paul says it, that is what we will be going with!

The Bible needs conservation, so if anyone is interested in helping us fund this work, please let us know!



### INTERESTED IN ICONIC BOSTON ARCHITECTURE?

Save the dates! Saturday, October 5 and 19, 2019, 10:00 am – 12:00 pm

## “The 5-4-3-2-1 Architectural Walking Tour: 5 Houses, 4 Centuries, 3 Neighborhoods, 2 Hours, 1 Amazing Tour”

*Presented by the House Museum Alliance of Downtown Boston*

From Colonial to Federal to Victorian, this picturesque walk from the North End to the Back Bay highlights the stylistic intricacies of the Paul Revere House, Otis House, Nichols House, Prescott House, and Gibson House.

\$25 Admission/\$20 Members; \$12 children under 12. Space is limited and pre-registration required.

Purchase tickets online at [www.Eventbrite.com](http://www.Eventbrite.com)

**For more information, contact the Paul Revere House at 617-523-2338.**



# Fall Events

This fall take time to pause and learn more about life in Colonial Boston during one of our Saturday programs. Watch a craftsperson work with materials familiar to Paul Revere, or consider the perspective of someone who lived two centuries ago. Our lecture series explores the context of the Missouri Crisis, as we mark its bicentennial. The free lectures will be held at Old South Meeting House on three Tuesday nights in September. Our onsite Paul Revere's Boston events on Saturdays are included with admission to the museum: adults \$5.00, seniors and college students \$4.50, children ages 5–17 \$1.00. Members and North End residents are admitted free at all times. Through October 31 the Revere House is open daily 9:30 am–5:15 pm. Beginning on November 1, the museum is open daily 9:30 am–4:15 pm.

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## PAUL REVERE'S BOSTON

### SEPTEMBER

**7 John Adams: The Colossus of Independence, 1:00, 1:45, & 2:30 pm.** Hear from John Adams himself as he discusses his earliest beginnings in Braintree through his days as delegate of the Continental Congress and foreign ambassador. Hear his opinions of his contemporaries and how he longs to be home with his “dearest friend,” Abigail, and their children. Mr. Adams’ singular wit is appealing to children and adults!

**14 Colonial Weaving Demonstration, 1:00–3:00 pm.**

Talented craftspeople, Fred & Zoe Lawson, demonstrate the art of creating cloth by hand and simple machines. Practice weaving on the small looms provided.



**21 Paper Marbling, 1:00–3:00 pm.** See how colonial craftsmen created eye-catching marbled papers. Watch as R. P. Hale floats pigments in water, swirls the colors, then transfers the designs to paper. It may look like magic but Hale will explain the very real science behind this fascinating phenomenon.



**28 Meet Harriet, Daughter of Paul Revere, 1:00, 1:45, & 2:30 pm.** Diane Lent brings to life Harriet Revere, one of Paul Revere’s 16 children. Join her in reminiscing about her father’s dramatic life, the adventures of her many siblings, nieces, and nephews, and growing up in the historic North End.



Diane Lent as Harriet Revere

### OCTOBER

**5 Printing Demonstration, 1:00–3:00 pm.** Did you know Paul Revere worked as an engraver? Using similar technology R. P. Hale produces copies of his own wood block image of the Revere House on a hand-cranked press. Prints (available for sale) are only made at the Revere House.

**12 Captain Amasa Soper’s Company, 1:00–3:00 pm.**

Costumed members of this Revolutionary War reenactment group take on the roles of farmers, printers, and tailors who volunteered to defend Boston harbor after the siege of the city ended in 1776.

**19 New England Traditionals, 1:00–3:00 pm.** Dave Neiman and Alan Kaufman play jigs, reels, and waltzes on the hammered dulcimer, fiddle, and mandolin.

*Please note: No program on October 26.*

## FALL LECTURE SERIES

*Lowell Lecture Series presented by the Paul Revere Memorial Association at Old South Meeting House*

### Maine, Massachusetts, and Missouri: The Crisis that Reshaped New England and the Nation

*All lectures are from 6:30–7:30 pm.*

**September 10: Whitemanism and the West, from the Missouri Compromise to the Dred Scott Decision,** Walter Johnson, Winthrop Professor of History and Professor of African and African American Studies, Harvard University

**September 17: The Politics of Slavery in the Era of Maine Statehood,** Mary T. Freeman, Assistant Professor of New England History, University of Maine

**September 24: The Great Missouri Question: Slavery and Sectional Conflict, 1819 – 1821,** John Craig Hammond, Associate Professor of History, Penn State University, New Kensington

*All lectures presented at Old South Meeting House, 310 Washington Street, in downtown Boston.*

*For more information, contact the Paul Revere House at 617-523-2338.*

*This series is made possible by a grant from the Lowell Institute.*

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*The* PAUL REVERE MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION

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*Distinguish yourself* as an active supporter of America's cultural heritage. Membership fees help preserve both the Revere and Hichborn Houses, and subsidize educational programs for schoolchildren. In appreciation for your support, you will receive the quarterly *Revere House Gazette*, a 10% discount on all purchases from the museum store, unlimited free admission to our historic buildings and programs, and much more.

*Please Join the Friends of Paul Revere Today!*

**MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION**

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**PLEASE CHECK ONE:**

- \$20 INDIVIDUAL
- \$35 FAMILY
- \$50-99 SUPPORTING
- \$100-249 PATRON
- \$250-499 PATRIOT
- \$500 SILVER CIRCLE

My additional donation of \$\_\_\_\_\_ is enclosed to support the museum's educational programs.

I don't care to join at this time but would like to make a contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to the museum.

**Please make check payable to the Paul Revere House and mail to:  
Paul Revere House, 19 North Square, Boston, MA 02113.**